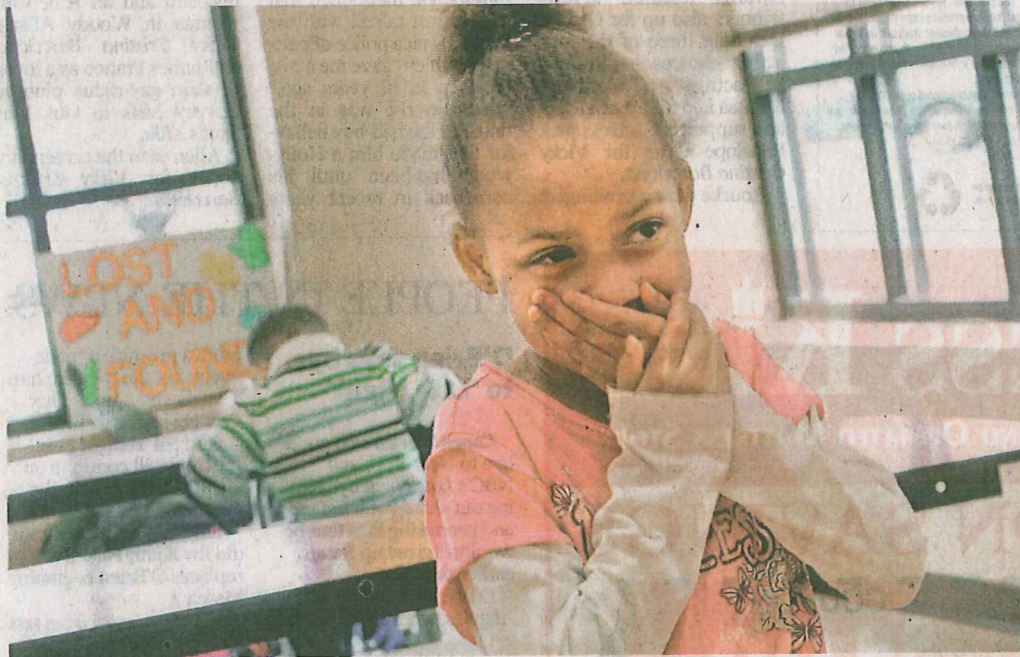


# THE TENNESSEAN

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## GROWING UP HOMELESS



Imani Granger laughs with friends in the cafeteria at Coles Ferry Elementary School in Lebanon. Imani, one of several homeless students at the school, lives at a shelter a few miles away. BILLY KINGSLEY / THE TENNESSEAN

## Uprooted kids flood shelters and schools

Economic hardship brings sharp increase in numbers, and a challenge to teachers, agencies

By Clay Carey and Christina E. Sanchez • THE TENNESSEAN

**LEBANON** — Imani Granger wiggled in her seat as she waited for her kindergarten teacher's attention.

The assignment: Draw something you like to do. Imani drew a pair of dress-wearing stick figures — herself and her mother sitting at a table with two plates of food in front of them.

Mom is smiling over what looks to be a plate of chicken. Imani's stick figure is grimacing at the squiggly lines on her plate. "I'm eating worms," she said, laughing.

In real life, Imani isn't eating worms. But the kindergartner isn't dining out much, either.

Imani Granger, age 6, is one of at least 2,200 homeless children in the Nashville area. Wilson, Sumner and Williamson

counties recently counted more students without a stable address in the first seven months of school than they did all of last year. Combined, those districts have more than 350 homeless students, up from a total of 262 the previous school year.

Many of the newly homeless are victims of the economy, thrust into an unfamiliar world because of housing foreclosures and high unemployment rates. And with the increase comes the challenge to schools and social service agencies to educate and house shell-shocked children sleeping in different beds and, sometimes, attending different schools.

Imani's family shares a room about half

» HOMELESS, 4A

### PHOTOS

Search **ECONOMY** for a slideshow on the plight of homeless students in Middle Tennessee.

### INSIDE

#### Shelter need outpaces space

Homeless students don't have a single profile. The places they live take many forms and the causes of their homelessness are just as varied. On 5A



# School statistics are key homelessness gauge

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the size of a one-car garage at a shelter for women and children in Lebanon. The bulk of their floor space is taken up by a metal-framed bunk bed — Imani and her brother Andrew, 5, share the top bunk; mother Nicole Lee and her baby boy, David, sleep on the bottom.

They've been there six months, watching other families come and go as livelihoods fell apart or situations improved. Families with children typically stay three to five months, said Liz Reese, director of Brooks House, the shelter where Imani lives.

## Pushed over the brink

Many newly homeless families were previously living paycheck to paycheck, barely able to afford rent, but they made do, said Cathie Buckner with the Nashville Homeless Power Project.

Then one or both adults in the household lost jobs, or they rented a house where the owner stopped making mortgage payments, or some other catastrophic event pushed them over the brink. In the recession, those scenarios are happening more frequently, Buckner said, and there aren't enough shelter beds for everyone.

Unemployment rates for the Nashville-Murfreesboro area reached 6.5 percent in December, up from 4.2 percent the same time last year, according to data from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

Some experts say school statistics are the best way to measure homelessness in a community, especially adolescent homelessness.

Parents aren't required to go to organizations for help, but they are required to register children for school and disclose where they stay.

Catherine Knowles said a lot has changed since she started as Metro's homeless education program supervisor in 1997. There were 200 homeless students at the time. Today, there are 1,193, and the district is ahead by 200 students compared with the same time last year.

She said Nashville's schools are getting a lot of families from other

states. The newcomers hope jobs are more plentiful and the cost of living is lower in Tennessee.

"They thought it would be better here," Knowles said. "They also may have family here and come to live with them."

Imani's mother, Nicole Lee, packed up Imani and Andrew and moved them to Tennessee last year. They left a rental home in Atlanta because living there had become too costly and a family dispute made it uncomfortable. The family moved in with a male friend of Lee's in Murfreesboro. The plan was to stay there for just a little while, until Lee could land a job and afford a place of her own.

"That is one decision I messed up on ... not planning it all the way," said Lee, 26.

The friendship evolved into a romantic relationship that ended badly about five months ago, as Lee was giving birth to her third child. Her friend kicked her out of the apartment they shared, Lee said, and she was discharged from the maternity ward into a homeless shelter.

"The whole time," Lee said, "I was thinking, 'What am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go? I don't know anybody in Tennessee.'"

Family was not an option: Her father in New Jersey couldn't afford to house them, and her relationship with her mother had soured. All three of her children have the same father in Atlanta, but he just got laid off from his job and can't afford to help support them.

In September, they took up residence at Brooks House, and Lee is applying at temp agencies, looking for work.

## Grades often suffer

After landing in Lebanon, Imani enrolled at Coles Ferry Elementary. School officials said there are at least 15 other homeless students there now; most of the children who stay at Imani's shelter go there.

In class, Imani cruises through an exercise on length without a hitch, easily picking out the tallest flowers in her math workbook. She brags that she already knows a quarter is 25 cents, a dime is 10 cents.

"To me, they're easy," Imani

## HOMELESS STUDENTS

	'05-'06*	'06-'07	'07-'08	'08-'09**	Enrollment
Metro Nashville	1,236	1,558	1,657	1,193	73,165
Wilson	95	102	174	214	14,700
Williamson	0	7	10	28	29,832
Sumner	162	60	88	108	26,542
Rutherford	595	571	605	542	36,647
Franklin	5	0	35	35	3,720
Lebanon	22	31	66	48	3,190
Murfreesboro	69	31	80	70	6,892
State	8,031	6,614	9,093	NA	929,543

SOURCE: Tennessee Department of Education and school districts

\* Numbers were bumped up by Hurricane Katrina victims in the area. \*\* So far this year

said after school. "Nothing is hard."

Homework isn't yet part of Imani's daily regimen. But her school occasionally sends home lessons on currency and reading the hands of the clock, worksheets that can be tough to finish given the swirl around Imani's family at the shelter.

Children Imani's age and younger romp up and down the halls or park themselves on couches in front of a communal TV. Older women smoke cigarettes on the back patio, talk about job prospects and listen to music in their rooms. Young mothers drift from room to room, tending to infants and trying to keep preteens in line.

Concentration is a common problem, homeless advocates say. Homelessness "can have a devastating effect ... you are looking at extreme poverty combined with instability," said Barbara Duffield, policy director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, a policy advocacy organization that works with school districts.

Getting homeless students to school is the first challenge.

Rutherford County School District will get transportation for the child and often make exceptions to keep him or her in the same building for the entire year. Kim Snell, that district's homeless student liaison, said students lose about four months of academic progress if they move during the school year.

Without help, Duffield said, homeless children fall behind. According to one study conducted in New York City, homeless stu-

dents were less than half as likely to score at or above grade level in math as were all students city-wide. Other studies have found that children who are homeless are 50 percent more likely to have repeated a grade than poor children in stable homes.

## 'A range of difficulties'

Imani loves going to school. "I have a hundred friends," she brags.

Over lunch, the girls chatter easily about food they like, kids they don't, and their common hero — Hannah Montana.

But Imani admits she has more fun playing with the kids at the shelter than with her peers at school. And during free time, while her classmates are in groups pretending to be teachers or building with blocks, Imani often ends up by herself, looking at books or putting together wooden puzzles.

Her assistant principal, Becky Kegley, said students from Brooks House often stick together and sit at extremes on the social spectrum.

"Either they are very withdrawn and afraid of the next move, or they are very used to moving around and meeting new people," she said.

Imani says most of the kids at her school don't know where she spends the night. She doesn't think they'd be mean to her if they knew.

"I want it to be a secret," she said. "Secrets are my favorite thing."

Many homeless children react the same way. The costs of homelessness can be devastating, said Dr. Ellen Bassuk, president of the National Center on Family Home-

lessness and an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

"I've seen kids with a range of difficulties," Bassuk said. "You may have a child who is toilet trained and all of sudden starts wetting the bed."

Homeless children can face various emotional and social challenges: depression, post-traumatic stress, anti-social behavior, anxiety and developmental delays. Health problems also rise. The children have stomachaches, asthma attacks and ear infections more often than their peers. They are hospitalized more often, too, an added problem for families who don't have insurance.

"These children get uprooted from everything that is familiar to them," Bassuk said, "their home, pets, friends, possibly family members."

As Imani colored pictures on a wooden stool in back of Brooks House, she said she likes her new school and wants to stay there. But there are things from her past life she longs for.

"I had friends in Georgia and I miss them," she said. "And I miss my kitty."

The kitten, Nola, was just a baby when she got it. When Nola got in trouble for scratching Andrew, Imani had to lay down the law.

"When she got this tall," Imani said, holding her hands a few inches apart, "I told her she did not need to be scratching people. She said 'meow!'"

When they left Georgia, Nola stayed behind. Imani assumes she's still there.

"Me and my momma can't wait until we get our own house and I get my own room," Imani said. When that happens, she said, she'll have time to herself, a quiet haven from the distractions of life in a shelter or sharing someone else's house.

She remembers the last time she had a room of her own — Nola would lie on her lap at bedtime, and Imani would hug her while she slept.

"My brother was not sleeping with me," Imani remembered. "Only me and my cat were sleeping together."

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